

the Bible. Prime among them was Ārumukar Nāvalar (1822–1879), who worked with Wesleyan missionary, Peter Percival (d. 1873), in revision of the Tamil Bible (Young/Jebanesan: 110), only to use his biblical knowledge to undermine Christianity through literalist readings. He used the Torah, for instance, as a “switch to thrash Christianity,” pointing out contradictions in its selective use in the NT (Young/Jebanesan: 117), and, in a familiar motif, attributed cruelty and injustice to the Christian God because an unbaptized but morally exemplary man could go to hell (Young/Jebanesan: 122). Critiques of Christianity using literalism were present also in the writings of Rām Mohan Roy (1772–1833), founder of the Brahmo Samāj, who also criticized the exclusivism present in the missionary representation of Jesus (Dasgupta).

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See also → Bibliolatry; → Four Senses of Scripture; → Inerrancy of the Bible; → Infallibility of the Bible; → Interpretation, History of; → Peshat

Literary Criticism

“Literary criticism” here refers to the general academic study of imaginative literature rather than the one-time specialized use of the term to refer to source criticism in English biblical studies.

Since its emergence as a modern discipline, literary criticism has evaded many of the constraints of philology and rhetoric – fields which had re-

quired readers to have an extensive training and familiarity with an array of tropes, languages, and literary texts. Since the late 18th century, modern textual interpretation opened the engagement with the humanistic canon to a large audience (Campe). The conception of interpretation as a universal capacity emerged concurrently with theological attempts at defining scriptural reading as a process geared toward the understanding of the biblical authors’ intention and of the culture that produced the Scripture (Frei: 91). Scriptural reading thus emerged as parallel – and, at times, exemplary – for the reading of literary texts. Dominant thinkers have thus opted to ground and exemplify new tenets in literary analysis within interpretations of biblical narratives, motifs, and figures. The canonical status of biblical sources enables the dissemination of new ideas in literary theory, facilitating debates between literary theoreticians and permeating the status of modern interpretation as a prominent cultural practice.

1. Supreme Aesthetics. The attempt to amalgamate biblical interpretation with literary and aesthetic theory emerged in the mid-18th century as British theologian Robert Lowth (1710–1787) propagated the idea that the understanding of Hebrew poetry could be honed through techniques hitherto reserved for works of literature. Lowth highlights what he describes as the uniquely literary merits of Biblical Hebrew including rhythm, chiasmus, and rhyme, which demonstrate, he argues, the “natural splendour” of the Scriptures (16–17). Lowth’s original approach to the Scripture became a boon to approaches in the German-speaking world which opted to reconcile historical and inspirational approaches to the Bible by portraying scriptural reading as a revelatory process of recuperating the text’s meanings. An eminent representative of this perspective, Johann Gottfried Herder, examined theological problems in conjunction with questions of philological limitations, translation difficulties, and textual circulation (in such writings as the 1767–68 *Fragments on Recent German Literature*). Herder described Biblical Hebrew as a language with uniquely aesthetic qualities (particularly in his long essay from 1783 *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*). He furthers this view in his project of assembling “Volkslieder” – texts which he characterized as manifesting nations’ respective cultural “spirit,” including in his collection the Song of Songs. In praising biblical poetry as a sublime representation of the ancient Hebrew nation, Herder could be described as a major proponent of “world literature” – a notion which continues to be central to literary studies to the present. Herder’s teacher, theologian Johann Georg Hamann, advocated in such writings as his 1762 *Aesthetica in Nuce* the view that a personal engagement with God demands the reader’s active participation in the process of reading scrip-

tures. In so doing, Hamann presented scriptural reading as exemplary for the reading of every text. Gaps in the reading of texts should be bridged, according to his aesthetic theory, by activating the reader's imagination.

2. Comparative Readings. If Lowth was the proponent of approaching the Bible through the prism of literary interpretation, his compatriot Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) could be described as the first promoter of the incorporation of the Bible into the literary canon. Arnold was making a case for examining the Bible as a supreme literary text for the purpose of enriching the humanist literary canon. In his view, the Bible should serve a pedagogical purpose, redefining the scriptures' potential to foster morality. Northrop Frye (1912–1991), a central contributor to the coherence of literary theory as a modern discipline and an ordained minister, could be claimed to perpetuate this view. Frye's *The Great Code* (1982) "attempts a study of the Bible from the point of view of a literary critic" (5) in order to enable students "to see what kind of literary influence it has had" (6) through a systematic analysis of the language, typology, and metaphors in the Bible.

Albeit in different forms, this presentation of the Bible as a central part of civilization's literary canon guides the works of such prominent contemporary literary critics as Robert Alter and Harold Bloom. In manifold "close readings" of biblical passages as well as in his biblical translations, Alter purports that the Scripture – with a focus on certain parts of the HB – contains an array of refined textual devices. Literary theory can explicate the scriptures' capturing power, as Alter opts to demonstrate in his tracing of such devices as type scenes (narratives which repeat in different biblical chapters), irony, metaphor, and poetic rhythm. Bloom takes the HB's alluring nature to be evident from its wide reception in the Western literary canon, where major works build on the dramatic effect created by known biblical scenes and motifs. Bloom engages not merely with the cultural heritage of the Bible per se but also debates the validity of some of the key approaches within modern biblical studies, in particular source criticism.

Theological debates pertaining to concrete philological difficulties in the Scriptures or to the response of biblical readers have repeatedly elicited in modernity new terminology and methods of textual interpretation. The hermeneutic tradition represented in the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Hans-Georg Gadamer demonstrates the dissemination of tenets from scriptural reading within literary interpretation. Schleiermacher's lectures on hermeneutics aimed at establishing a paradigmatic theory of understanding defined as a human capacity and manifested through biblical interpretation. Schleiermacher's interventions in Protestant theology guide this inquiry, which

takes the circulation of Jesus' message as the predominant moment in human history, thus seeking to differentiate the NT from the OT. Schleiermacher's focus on the contextualization of authors' utterance in their individual life circumstances has epitomized later strands in hermeneutics which to a large extent distance themselves from Christian dogmatism.

3. Global Readership and Its Critique. Studies of narratology have often positioned the Bible as a platform on which to experiment with – and reaffirm – new tenets. Theoreticians belonging to the school of "reader's response" (who seek to describe readers' cognitive engagement with texts) refer to biblical narrative as exemplary of textual interplays with readers' reactions, expectations and presumptions. Meir Sternberg and Menakhem Perry thus present biblical narration as imbuing multiple levels of irony in the biblical story. In an influential article they demonstrate that the biblical David and Bathsheba story derives its power from the inconclusiveness of the plot: did Uriah know about David's actions? Did David assume that Uriah knew about his actions? The critics describe the so-called openness of the story as subtending narratological tension (321).

This approach's universalistic nature – it presumes that all readers are guided by similar cognitive impulses – was criticized by literary theoreticians who view reading as grounded primarily in readers' specific social position. Representing such an approach, Mieke Bal claims in her work *Lethal Love* that the reading of biblical stories has been biased, for thousands of years, by patriarchal assumptions. In her reading of literary texts which correspond with the Bible, Bal opts to trace their ability to shed light on aspects of scripture that had been suppressed in traditional readings, particularly the presentation of vigorous female agency.

Contemporary voices in literary studies have also taken issue with previous presentations of readership as global: the positioning of the Bible as a central work of "world literature" has been described as normative (rather than descriptive). Emily Apter thus contends that the view of biblical motifs as transmittable has subtended, for example in the works of Harold Bloom, a portrayal of literary works as a transmittable capital: If the duty to translate is rooted in Bloom's writing in the cipher of the Hebrew Bible and its secular re-inscription in the aesthetics of romanticism, one could say that in more recent philosophy and theory, the duty to *not* translate is derived from Islamic tradition (253).

Apter's statement marks a new stage in the critique of the normative power of literary approaches to the Bible. The interplay between theology and secularism common to such perspectives is taken to foster the cultural context of the Judeo-Christian tradition as the pertinent framework for conceiving a "cultural Bible" though the lens of literary theory.

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See also → Arnold, Matthew; → Frye, Northrop;
→ Hamann, Johann Georg; → Herder, Johann
Gottfried; → Lowth, Robert

Literature, Bible as

Literature, which derives from the Latin for letters (*litterae*, a term that refers both to epistles, e.g., in the Vg. 2 Kgs 10:7, or writing as such, e.g., 2 Cor 3:6), can refer to any written text. But the term applies more specifically to written works of elevated or enduring quality, particularly works of "imagination." In the case of the *EBR*, "literature" has referred especially to works of poetry, fiction, and drama from the medieval period to the present. The goal of this article is to contextualize the category of "literature" in historical and conceptual terms and then to relate it to the Bible and its reception.

As writing (as opposed to speech), literature permits language to reach more than one audience at more than one time. Over time, and thanks in large part to biblical texts and their reception history, literature has acquired the purpose of transcending and sometimes overcoming time, particularly the time allotted to a human life, whether it be seventy or eighty years (Ps 90) or the full limit of 120 (Gen 6:3; Deut 34:7).

Of course, ideas of literature draw from non-biblical as well as biblical roots; these include texts and traditions in Greek and Latin, as well as from the Ancient Near East, South Asia, Africa, and China. But with few exceptions until the 20th century, western discussions of literature referred primarily to western texts within a circumscribed canon of writings. Among the many influential works that shaped ideas of the Bible as literature are medieval mystery and passion plays; Dante's *Commedia*, with its integration of Roman classical epic and Christian allegory; Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; and many writings of German and English Romanticism.

One preoccupation of literary thought has been the question whether literature is a dangerous imitation of reality, as Plato's *Republic* suggests, or an instructive representation of it, as Aristotle's *Poetics*

would have it. Through new methods of biblical interpretation, for example the allegorical readings of Philo of Alexandria and Origen and the apologetics of Justin Martyr, the Bible reached wide audiences in late antiquity. These modes of reading, rooted in Hellenistic thought and philology, nevertheless contributed to discussions of the Bible and literature, particularly during the Renaissance.

But the transmission and translation of the Bible itself, for instance from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek in the LXX, led to a wider set of discussions among Christian and Jewish thinkers about the literary merits and deficiencies of the Bible vis-à-vis Greek and Roman works of literature. Christian apologetic texts, rooted in the preaching and writing of Paul and extending to Augustine and later writers, sought to demonstrate and defend the excellence of biblical texts according to Greek and Roman poetic and rhetorical standards. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, for instance, defends the style and contents of Christian Scripture and warns against excessive concern with eloquent and beautiful writing. For Augustine as for his predecessors Origen and Jerome, the challenge was simply how to preserve the Bible as a foundational canon while reading it in a non-literal way.

Rabbinic traditions, meanwhile, engaged the HB in its original languages and developed hermeneutical methods that descended from methods of reading established before the canon was complete. The "inner-biblical exegesis" of biblical authors and editors would thus share much in common with rabbinic strategies of reading except for the fact that the rabbis worked with a closed, completed canon (Fishbane: 7–18). While midrash halakhah helped clarify the application of the Torah, midrash aggadah elaborated biblical texts through narrative. Other hermeneutical genres would be more poetic, such as piyyutim, poetic texts drawing from the Bible in liturgy. In this way, rabbinic traditions of commentary were thoroughly literary from the beginning, even if "literature" was not a concept internal to the tradition.

It often surprises students to learn that the study of the Bible as literature has only become central to biblical studies in the past few decades. Of course, in spite of centuries of scrupulous attention to the text, Jewish and Christian exegetes often failed to observe basic features of genre, structure, and literary artistry (Alter: 12–16). It is a paradox of the history of biblical interpretation that centuries of Jewish and Christian exegesis place such value on the Bible without noticing some of its literary features. But these traditions, which share a general orientation to scripture as complete, divinely authorized, and comprehensive, approach the Bible to guide and resonate throughout the religious lives of their communities.

Nevertheless, contemporary discussions of the Bible as literature have origins first of all in the